

MUTATIONS IN THE FOODSTUFF QUALITY PERCEPTION OF THE NEW CONSUMERS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

In the current context of the market, very complex and dynamic, we can observe the crystallization of a new generation of consumers, with a specific behavior and a particular manner of approaching the quality unlike the one of traditional consumer. The concept of quality, perceived by the traditional consumer in the classical, deterministic and objective sense, loses its facets nowadays and transcends into another dimension, in the vision of the new consumer, in which the perception of quality in a predominantly subjective manner, comes first.

This paper presents the objectives of a research project that we intend to develop, in order to highlight the mutations that occurred in the foodstuff quality perception of the new consumers from Romania. We focused on foodstuff because it is a customary part of our daily lives, that shouldn't be approached merely as a common factor for meeting physiological needs of macro and micro-nutrients, but from a holistic perspective in terms of its social and identity functions and the effects on individual health.

Another important goal of the project is to improve the standard of education and culture in foodstuff consumption and to give to the new consumers from Romania the skills for an objective assessment of food quality. We believe that all these could lead to the conversion of the new consumers of foodstuff in ethical and responsible consumers.

Keywords: new consumer, quality perception, mutations, foodstuff, ethical consumerism

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Introduction

Consumer behavior has changed greatly over the last 25 years, but it has been evolutionary and the seeds of change have been apparent for generations (Kar, 2010).

Mutations occurring in the new type consumer's perception of quality should not be understood as a quickly process or easy to locate in time. In any case, we believe that the origin of these changes in consumer mind is found through the '70s, is somewhat related to the previous occurrence of the concept of consumer protection and consumer rights statement.

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So after some researchers, the quality depends on the extent to which the characteristics of a certain product correspond with the mental representation (symbolically speaking) of the consumer or customer's preferences and expectations. Subsequently, Ishikawa (1986) developed the definition of offering quality and consumer preferences/expectations.

Obviously, under these conditions, we talk about two distinct levels, two manifestations of the same phenomenon: on one hand is a mostly objective, namely the inherent quality of the product as a result of the level reached by certain characteristics (physical, chemical, nutritional, economic, aesthetic, ergonomics etc.), often prescribed data sheets, standards etc., and on the other side is a largely subjective, as a result of the perception of quality by the consumer. We also believe that there can be no complete identity between the two sides. Subjective side of the new consumer will always surpass the objective side, which is beyond his expectations (Negrea and Voinea, 2010).

This way of thinking can be explained by the fact that the new consumer expects to receive more than what is conventionally a generic product. Also, the trademark symbol plays a very important role (Levy and Rook, 1999).

The novelty of the project is the research of the conceptual transpositions regarding the definition of food quality in the mind of the new consumer of foodstuff from Romania, the proposed project being justified by the observation of mutations occurring in addressing quality and in the alimentary behavior.

1. Objectives and research methodology

Understanding the changes in the definition of the attribute of food quality among the new generation of consumers requires, first, an analysis of the general concept of quality, in all stages of its evolution: the statistical control of quality, the quality inspection, total quality management and excellence in business.

Since the concept of food quality is a complex and integrating concept, one of the project's objectives is researching the mutations occurred in its evolution, with emphasis on the clear delimitation of the hypostasis in which it occurred over time: technical quality, nutritional quality, sensory quality and hygienic and sanitary quality.

Noting the two-way relationship between the supply and demand for foodstuff, we consider it as necessary to conduct a study regarding the development trends of food supply in Romania. The study aims to capture the reorientation of consumer demand, to highlight the changes in food supply in the industrial era and also to identify the new trends of diversification of food production.

Knowing that human-food interaction is subject to objective and subjective influences, of a personal, national and international nature, an important objective of the project is to analyze the determinants of food behavior, starting from a series of conceptual clarifications and then highlighting the main behavioral types of the food consumer, as well as the contemporary food styles.

Considering that, in the current context of the foodstuffs market in Romania, we can distinguish two types of consumers, a traditional consumer and a new type and noting that their behavioral differences arise from the individual perception of food quality, we believe

that one of the most important research directions is in highlighting the changes the attribute of quality in the consumer mind, including at the same time the main elements of synergy and antagonism.

An important contribution of the research project is the formulation of proposals regarding the development of the current strategies of information and education of the new foodstuff consumer in Romania, in terms of adopting a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle. In this regard, we suggest the adoption of ethical consumerism as a possible behavior model of the new consumer, as well as developing a guide for the orientation of his food related behavior.

To achieve the objectives, the methodologies used are reflected in appropriate and effective methods and techniques of investigation and research, as to ensure the reproducibility and a representative nature of the obtained results.

The interdisciplinary approach, involving the harmonious use of knowledge from different fields such as quality science, quality management, commodity science, food commodity science, consumer science and consumer protection, gives the project an elevated degree of novelty and complexity, supported by combining market research techniques and of methods of information, documentation, processing and data analysis.

2. Importance and relevance of the project

Food is one of the main carriers of environmental information, being essential in the functioning of the human body. In this respect, the quality of food is what matters essentially in preventing disease and maintaining health.

Thus, the concept of food quality is complex, absorbing, encompassing over time a series of situations: technical quality, nutritional quality, sensorial quality, hygienic and sanitary quality.

Highlighting the major shifts in the definition and perception of quality of food by consumers is key goal of research.

Thus, in operationalizing the concept of food quality, the starting point was the technical quality, expressed through a series of quality characteristics, among which, the primary role was held by physicochemical and microbiological characteristics, measurable by objective methods, usually standardized.

In this context, the attribute of food quality was perceived by the consumer according to a referential (laws, standards and technical regulations).

The nutritional quality is a higher stage in the perception and definition of food quality, because the satisfaction of energetic and biological needs of the consumer are the main concerns. At this stage, the consumer no longer views the quality of the product strictly in terms of its inherent technical characteristics, being more interested in its nutritional profile. This mutation occurred as a result of changes in modern lifestyle, materialized, in particular, through the consumer exposure to an intense mental demand, but also due to an increase in degenerative diseases, as a result of various nutritional mistakes (Popescu, 2006).

Sensorial quality is another aspect of food quality, being the one that determines consumer's sympathy for certain products, this being crucial in motivating purchase and consumption decisions. The sensorial value is expressed through attributive and notional quality characteristics, which cannot be always determined by objective means; hence the high degree on subjectivity in the perception on quality by consumers. Although it is widely known that the agreeable sensorial properties of food contributes to increasing assimilation of nutrients in the body, we believe that absolutization of their role in evaluating quality by the consumer may result in the appearance of a nutritional imbalance, because a food product with special psihosensorial bonds does not always have a balanced nutritional profile at the same time.

Currently, the hygienic quality, another dimension of food quality tends to acquire overwhelming importance, due to repeated food crisis in industrialized states (mad cow disease, avian influenza), which marked the last decades and generated an exacerbation of consumer preoccupation for the hygienic and sanitary food safety. Today, the consumer perceives in an acute way the nutrition quality through food innocuity. Thus, assuring the hygienic and sanitary quality implies minimizing biological, chemical or allergic risks that can seriously affect consumer's health.

In this context, to ensure innocuity of food throughout the food chain (from farm to fork) various food safety management systems were designed and implemented, some of which are: HACCP system (Hazard Analysis in Critical Control Points) and the system promoted by the ISO 22000/2005 standard (Food safety management systems, requirements for every organization in the food chain). Similar to the "zero defects" principle from the quality management theory, these systems desire to achieve "zero risks" in assuring food innocuity.

Lately noticing a watershed in the consumers' attitude towards the offer of food products, characterized by the increasing attraction for cultural and traditional food, distrust for products obtained by genetic engineering techniques (OMG), as well as for food obtained through intensive agricultural techniques, industrially ultra-processed and widely ranged especially through food additives and respectively high sympathy towards organic products, one of the project's objectives is doing a study on the development tendencies of the Romanian food products offer.

The trend in development of cultural food supply is a response to consumers' shift in demand for organic food products. We can distinguish various categories of cultural food: traditional food, traditional food with a controlled designation of origin and organic traditional food.

Although the consumer tendency to shift their demand organic food products has become a reality, today, the preponderant offer of food had its origin in the industrial period, when intensive agricultural and animal husbandry technologies enabled the development of a strong food industry. Also, in this period, the fast-food, cans and semi-cooked meals industry, conquered the market, but at the same time, they brought along the modern civilization's diseases (Olinescu, 2006).

Thus, agri-food materials, obtained through extensive use of fertilizers, pesticides, growth hormones and antibiotics, are highly processed, which results in the production of contaminated food that is depleted of its essential nutrients (Toma et al., 2010).

In addition, the sensorial characteristics of food are not always natural, because of products with artificial taste, aroma, color and texture, due to the use of food additives, the consequence being the extension of a range of goods with an unbalanced nutritional profile (Voinea, 2009).

Regarding the renewal of the food product offer, it relies on the application of research and innovation results in the food industry, process in which we can distinguish the dominant tendencies of diversification, the attainment of genetically modified food and, respectively, of functional products (Pamfilie and Voinea, 2009).

Analysis of alimentary determinatives behavior is another project objective that is justified by identifying the existence of a two-way relationship between supply and demand of food, relationship that can generate a certain type of nutrition among consumers, who can opt for a meat based alimentation, omnivorous or vegetarian. Thus, a consumer's type of nutrition is defined by a diet consistently practiced throughout life or, at least, for prolonged periods of time, this being determined by specific physiological features or factors related to food habits, traditions, religious beliefs, ways of access to food (Popescu, 2009).

Starting by knowing the contemporary food styles, we can distinguish between a traditional consumer of alimentary goods and one of a new type. Thus, accepting the fact that each of them has a specific food behavior, we state that the behavioral differences that occur due to the particular perception of food quality, thus we propose to highlight the mutations in the mentality of food consumers in Romania.

In the traditional consumer's mentality, the quality perception is decisively influenced by the technical aspects, the product's sensorial side remaining in the second plane. This approach is the result of knowledge and information gained successively through education and settled through professional and personal experience. Also characteristic to this consumer is the way of understanding non-quality, which translates into his mentality through non-compliance with specifications and/or rules in force.

"The new consumer"- depicted as an individual consumer - is seduced by the sensorial side in evaluating the food product's quality. The role of sensorial perception should not be downplayed or approached in a simplistic manner, since all that is conscious reach us through sensorial perception (Jung, 1994).

The new consumer formed his eating habits during the time of maximum boost in the food industry and is generally accustomed to eating products created by the modern food industry, characterized by the special sensorial properties, but not always with a nutritional balanced profile. These images are stored in the memory of the "new consumer". Therefore, the possibility of gaining its knowledge, which requires the comparison between the perceived images of the food product and those from memories, is evidently limited. This would explain the "new consumer's" propensity to generalize the sensorial properties' role in configuring the quality of a food product and neglecting or even disdaining nutritional and technical properties.

In the new consumer's mind, the image of a food product's quality can be formed as a result of influences from the new means of communication. With the aid of Internet facilities, "the new consumer" can join a group, whose members can exchange ideas about, among other things, the quality of food they consume. This type of online conversations is controlled by consumers. The Internet boom accelerated and intensified this behavior to

high levels, and small group discussions developed into a mass phenomenon, which brings together hundreds or thousands of unknown users (Negrea, 2007).

Currently, the new consumer is characterized by Internet addiction, the media that enjoyed a growing confidence on the part of consumers and from which it gets information that it directs the buying decision (Onete, Voinea, and Dina, 2010). Consumer choices are made increasingly more and more on the basis of social media information. In addition to deciphering the advertising message and reading the websites of companies, consumers use different online formats (forums, chats, blogs, etc.) to share ideas, to form communities and to contact their peers.

As pointed by Kozinets (2010) social media is increasingly seen as a more objective source of information and all these communities have a real existence to their members and therefore have effect on many aspects of behavior, including alimentary behavior.

The mutations noted in the food consumer's mentality involves a certain amount of antagonism between the traditional and the new type of consumer, manifested through the different importance given to the technical and sensorial aspects of the food product's quality. Nevertheless, we draw attention to the fact that, at a primary level - that of meeting nutritional needs - both types of consumers manifest synergism, through the equal importance granted to the nutritional value of food, namely the hygienic-sanitary value, the other aspects of food quality.

In the context of contouring the new consumer's mentality, we note that current consumers are more and more sophisticated and have a more and more powerful influence, and producers - if they want to maintain their positions - they must follow the market. A trend which gains more and more amplitude among consumers, especially in the Western states, is that of ethical consumerism (Negrea, 2008).

Currently, one can observe that ethical consumerism takes amplitude and is no longer a niche market, as it once was considered. However, this shift in consumer behavior is visible only in some Western countries, where the standard of living allows the development of such behavior (Stanciu, 2008). History will confirm (or not) how quickly this current will be transmitted to other states, which do not have the same level of development and, especially, how the ethical consumerism model will be accepted in Romania.

Noticing that in the contemporary consumer's alimentation there is a series of unhealthy habits, manifested by excessive consumption of animal proteins, saturated fat, salt and sugar, we consider useful to develop an orientation guide on food consumption behavior, which can be based on proper nutrition laws (law of quantity, law of quality, law of equilibrium, law of suitability).

3. Results

The main research results, which also constitute elements of project originality, can be considered the following:

- Elaboration of studies and syntheses, following the investigation of the literature in the field, which will allow for the assessment of the permanent status of research on the project's topic;

- Demarcation from a conceptual point of view of the main aspects of food quality;
- Identifying future research priorities to improve food quality and safety;
- Highlighting the changes in food supply in the industrial era;
- Investigation of new trends to diversify the supply of foodstuff;
- Making a comparative analysis of the types of behavior and the contemporary styles of nutrition;
- Identifying key elements of synergy and antagonism in the perception of the food quality by the traditional consumer and the new-type consumer;
- Highlighting the changes of the attribute of food quality in the mentality of the new consumer in Romania;
- The reorientation of the new food consumer's behavior by adopting the model of ethical consumerism;
- Developing a guide regarding the development among food consumers of a balanced food behavior, based on the laws of proper nutrition.

The project will have a powerful technical, economic and social impact and also a considerable impact on the environment.

Conclusions

The research of conceptual transpositions occurring in the modern consumer's mind will be the starting point for generating new approaches to food quality in terms of sustainable economic development ethics (concern for the environment, preserving resources and traditions, etc.). Deciphering these transpositions will help us develop a model of food consumption and, perhaps, change the mentality of consumers in the beginning of the third millennium.

In order that new generations of consumers in Romania acquire the behavioral traits of the new consumer from developed countries, primarily is needed to increase their education level. An essential component of consumer education is represented by nutritional education, through which is possible to restore the nutritional guidelines for adopting a healthy diet, based on principles of a balanced alimentation and to transform them into responsible consumers.

The research project will have implications for both academic and practitioners in the field of human nutrition and alimentary behavior and could be a landmark in formulating future strategies to improve the nutritional education level of the new consumers from Romania.

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